

Editorial Pages

# *So That the Sacrifices of 1964 Will Not Have Been in Vain*

By MARY E. KING

It has been 20 years since I had to telephone the parents of Andrew Goodman to tell them that their son and two other civil-rights volunteers who were part of a massive summer voter-registration program were missing near Meridian, Miss., and we feared the worst.

By the time I called them in New York on the night of June 21, 1964, I already had been on the telephone for several hours from the headquarters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, one of the organizations behind the voter-registration drive. I had systematically called every jail and detention center in the five-county area that surrounded Meridian to ask local law officers if our co-workers were being detained there. One of my calls was to the Neshoba County, Miss., jail where I spoke with Cecil Ray Price, the deputy sheriff, who denied what later became apparent—that the three men were then in his custody.

I also notified the Federal Bureau of investigation, whose agents did not arrive in Meridian until at least 20 hours after they were contacted.

James Earl Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Goodman had left Meridian at 9 a.m. that Sunday. They were stopped in Philadelphia, Miss., 35 miles away, at 4 p.m., given a speeding ticket, spent six hours in jail and were, we were subsequently told, "released" at 10 p.m. the same evening.

Two days later their charred and burned station wagon was found in a swamp 15 miles north of Philadelphia.

Forty-four days and a nationwide search later, after payment of \$25,000 to an informer, the FBI found the men's bodies buried under the dam of a newly constructed cattle pond on a farm in a densely wooded area south of Philadelphia. Each had been beaten and shot to death.

Although they were only three of the more than 20 activists who gave their lives in the struggle for human rights in that era, there is no moving memorial to them on the Washington Mall, as there is for the 57,939 who died in Vietnam.

Yet what Chaney, 21, Goodman, 20, and Schwerner, 24, died for was the most fundamental of all democratic rights—the right to vote. Twenty years later it's appropriate to note what a difference that contribution has meant.

A federal grand jury indicted 19 defendants in 1965 and charged them with

conspiracy to intercept and kill Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. Seven of the defendants, including Deputy Sheriff Price, were convicted on Oct. 20, 1967.

One reason the murders helped prompt the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act was that there was a President in the White House who was responsive to the civil-rights movement's challenge to make democracy work for all Americans.

Previously a disfranchised 11% of the population, blacks are beginning to gain their fair share of elected officials—slowly at state and national levels but more rapidly in local governments.

By contrast, today we have an incumbent in the White House who 20 years ago stumped in the South on behalf of Sen. Barry Goldwater's presidential bid by promoting the concept of states' rights—a code word for license to deny blacks their basic constitutional rights.

During his 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan went to Neshoba County, Miss., where he pledged support for the "new federalism," a more subtle approach to states' rights.

Even if some of those who were convicted in 1967 were not in the crowd that day, the message of the Reagan visit was very loud and very clear. But condoning states' rights means tolerating states' wrongs. The undemocratic policies of states' rights have been largely abandoned by most political leaders—except Reagan.

That message reverberates today. Since he took office, President Reagan's record has been one of consistent attempts to roll back the advances of the last 20 years for minorities by weakening the right to equal opportunity that is supposed to be the hallmark of our democracy.

In August, 1964, there were memorial services for the three Mississippi martyrs in 17 U.S. cities. Today the most fitting memorial to the sacrifice made by those young men would be the effective use of the right for which they died to assure that we again will have a President who favors an inclusive democracy and true justice—for all.

*Mary E. King, formerly deputy director of ACTION—which included the Peace Corps, VISTA, Foster Grandparents and other national volunteer service programs—is executive director of Young Ideas, Inc., a public policy organization in Washington.*